

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY



Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 394.

Price, Five Cents.

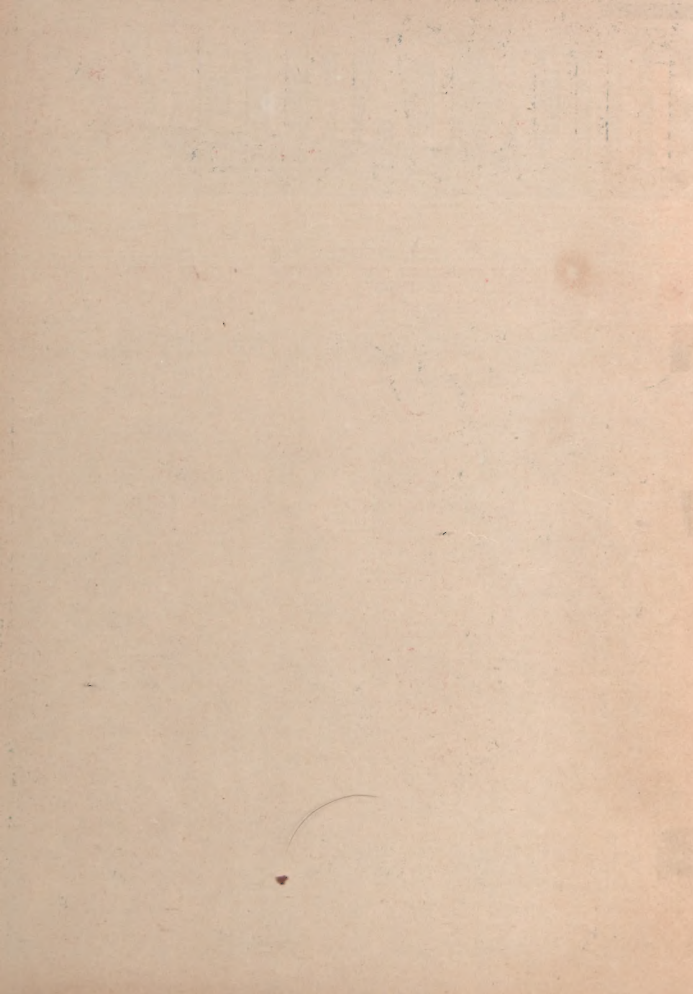
A PRINCESS OF HADES

OR THE REAPPEARANCE OF DALAAR, THE FIEND



BY THE AUTHOR OF
"NICK CARTER"

With a bound Nick leaped forward, seized the iron bars of his cage, and twisted them in his herculean grasp, until they snapped like straws.





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NEW YORK, July 16, 1904.

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A PRINCESS OF HADES

OR,

The Reappearance of Dazaar.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A WARNING FROM THE GRAVE.

It was half-past eleven o'clock at night and Nick Carter was seated alone in his study when the electric buzzer, which communicated with the front door of his residence, sounded an alarm.

The detective had only a moment before notified the servants that they might retire, and it so happened that not one of his assistants was in the house, so he laid aside the book he was reading and with a sigh of resignation, descended the stairs in person to answer the summons.

When he opened the door he discovered upon the steps outside a man of unusually large proportions, who advanced quickly across the threshold, and with his hand extended cordially toward him, exclaimed:

"How are you, Mr. Carter? I suppose you will remember me, for I am told that you never forget anybody. I'm Buck Granger, Tom Chelsea's friend; I was with you at the finish of that Dazaar business.* I wanted to see you *bad*, Mr. Carter, so I have come, even at this unearthly hour. I hope you've got time to see me."

"Why, Buck, how are you?" was the hearty greeting given the caller by the detective. "I thought you had gone back to Montana—to the Missoula country. Indeed I remember you, and I'm very glad to see you again. Come in."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. That's the sort of welcome

* See No. 377 of the Nick Carter Weekly. N. B.—A full history of the Dazaar adventures will be found in the Nick Carter Weekly, Nos. 372 to 377, inclusive.—AUTHOR.

that does a fellow like me a heap of good. They're not handed out to strangers in New York, as a rule."

"No, I suppose not. Come right up to my study and we'll talk over old times. It is strange how the sight of you brings back all of that Dazaar experience."

"Does it? Well, I shouldn't wonder if what I have to tell you would bring it back a good deal more forcibly than my looks do. That's what I'm here for."

"Eh? What?"

"That's what I'm here for; to remind you of that Dazaar business, and warn you that Dazaar has come back."

Nick laughed aloud.

"Dazaar come back?" he said, leading the way up the stairs and through the door into his study. "You are dreaming, Buck. Dazaar is dead."

"Not much. Dazaar ain't dead!" responded Buck Granger, scornfully. "I say, Carter, was Dazaar a man or a woman?"

"The Dazaar we knew was a woman."

"And an infernally beautiful woman, too."

"Yes," said Nick, in smiling assent; "that is about the correct word to apply to her beauty, I should say."

"And you think she is dead, do you?"

"I am positive that the Dazaar I knew is dead, Buck; and I doubt if there were two of them in the world. I don't think there could be two such human fiends as she confessed herself to be."

"Humph! Maybe not."

Granger lapsed into moody silence while he lighted a cigar which the detective passed to him. Then, presently, he said:

"I wish she could bring Tom Chelsea to life along with her. I'd be in a mood to forgive her, in that case. Poor old Tom!"

"It is a year ago this very month, isn't it?" said Nick.

"Just."

"And you think that Dazaar has come to life again, do you?" continued the detective.

"I'm dead sure of it."

"But it isn't possible, Buck; you should know that.

You were at the funeral, and—why, it was you who carried out her last request and purchased the tomb at Woodlawn for her."

"Correct. That's what worries me."

"Worries you? How so?"

"Because, although I bought the tomb and had her put into it—because, although I stood by while the tomb was sealed up forever, as I supposed, and because, although within the last twenty-four hours have been out to that tomb and inspected it, and it doesn't show a sign of ever having been touched since the day I saw her put into it and fastened there, I'd be willing this minute to gamble the last dollar I've got on earth—and I'm rich, as you know, since Tom's death—I'd be willing to gamble every cent of all I've got that she isn't there."

"Nonsense, Buck."

"I'll bet you a thousand dollars to a hundred on it, all the same."

"Nonsense."

"Will you bet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why, such a bet would be like taking candy from a child. The tomb was hermetically sealed, wasn't it?"

"It was if the orders were carried out."

"Those were her own orders to you, weren't they?"

"Certainly; and I carried them out to the letter as far as I was able."

"And you say that you were there during the last twenty-four hours?"

"I was; and the tomb looked exactly as it did the day I left it there with her body inside it."

"And so, of course, it is there yet—where you left it. Any discussion as to that point is rank nonsense, Buck. Let us approach the subject from a different side. What has occurred to make you think that Dazaar still lives. Or, rather why are you here at all?"

"I came here to ask you to get a permit for us to open and examine that tomb to-morrow morning."

"Nothing would be easier if a good reason for such a thing is made plain; so first, let us get at the reason. Do you think you have one? A good one?"

"That is as you take what I have to tell you."

"Very well; let us hear what that is."

"Why, it is simple enough. Irma Plavatski was the same by which we knew her, wasn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Very well; Irma Plavatski, under another name, is live and in New York. I have seen her a dozen times within the last week. I saw her this very day—this very evening. I have spoken to her. I know where she lives—and by the great ridge of the Rockies, she can't live in the city of New York and walk the streets, and be in a tomb at Woodlawn at the same time, can she?"

"Not very well," laughed Nick. "I'll grant you that much."

"You'll grant me more than that before I am through."

"Well, go ahead. I am willing to be convinced if you can convince me."

"I say I have seen her."

"And you mean that you think you have seen her."

"I know I have."

"It is a trick of resemblances, that's all, Buck. You have seen somebody who looks like her."

"Not on your life. I thought that was the case at first, but I've made up my mind that it is her."

"I have seen wonderful resemblances in my career as a detective," said Nick.

"Well, so have I, and without being a detective either. Look her, Carter; it's a year since Tom Chelsea was murdered by old Murillo Cortez, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And Irma Plavatski, after confessing that she was the real Dazaar and telling you a lot of wonderful and unbelievable things, died about two weeks later, didn't she?"

"Three weeks later, to a day, Buck."

"A week more or less doesn't make much difference.

What I want to say to you now is this: There was something that occurred that night of her confession which you did not choose to tell me about, but I have always known that there was a lapse of time, then, when I was not conscious of what was taking place. Do you remember that she called me up in front of

her and traced upon my bare arm, with a pen, a lot of queer characters?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, I remember when she did that, and the next thing I knew was, I was standing in front of her just the same, as if I had not moved, and she was wiping the characters off my arm with her handkerchief. It seemed as if there hadn't been a minute of time passed, but all the same my legs were tired as if I had walked a long distance, and there was a lot of mortar on one of my shoes. Now, I know that I had not been near a place where builders were at work that day, and I am convinced that there was a long interval of time between the writing of the characters on my arm and the time of erasing them. Do you happen to know what happened to me during that time?"

"Yes; I know. Perhaps, later, I will tell you."

"All-right. Take your time about it. But bear this in mind: If there is something about that time which I do not know and you do know, there is also something which I know which you don't know about. It is like the clown's song in the circus, isn't it?"

"Very. What is it that you know, Buck?"

"I know what Irma Plavatski told me during the frequent interviews while she was a prisoner. I know that she intended to return to earth, after her death—or supposed death, call it what you will—and I know—— But you will not believe me if I tell you."

"Tell me, nevertheless; perhaps I will believe."

"I know that when she made her confession to you, as she told me she had done, while she sat before you holding the hand of my dead partner, Tom Chelsea, and swearing that it was love for him that had brought her to her senses, it was not Tom Chelsea she had loved, and whom she loved at that moment, but it was the man who had defied her and beaten her at every turn of the cards. She was talking to the man she loved, and she swore to me, when I promised to have the tomb built for her according to her directions, that she would come to life again after a time. She swore that she would return, and that all the powers of mystery and wisdom she had gleaned during a thousand years, would be concentrated upon that man, to win

him, or if he could not be won, to send him to a deeper and more awful hell than Dante ever dreamed of—and that man, Nick Carter, was you!"

CHAPTER II.

CAN THE TOMB DISGORGE ITS DEAD?

Nick Carter remained silent after the astounding statement made by Buck Granger.

To do him justice, he had never thought of such a possibility as that suggested by the assertion of his friend from Montana, but now that it was presented to him in such unvarnished language, he could not deny to himself that it might have been so.

He recalled vividly the proud and wondrous beauty of Irma Plavatski, and he remembered with an involuntary shudder, the incomprehensible statements she had made in her confession—the unbelievable assertions she had so coolly uttered.

In effect, they were these: Dazaar had originally been a man—a priest of Thibet, a seer, a magician, a necromancer, a man of wonderful knowledge and far-reaching power and wisdom who, in pursuit of the studies and customs of his native land (that mysterious region which remains to this day utterly unknown to the outside world) had learned how to prolong his life indefinitely through generation after generation into many centuries, through the power of hypnotics and by infusing his own soul into the living body of a youth who had been reared and educated to serve that specific purpose when the time should come. And this, Dazaar claimed to have done many, many times until he had lived more than a thousand years. And then it had come upon him that there was one branch of knowledge which he had not attained—womanhood. That could be accomplished only by becoming a woman, and so a beautiful girl—Irma Plavatski—had been chosen. She had been thrown into this strange hypnotic state, and kept in that condition until the time was ripe to make the change; and then—Dazaar had stepped out of the shell of his old and worn-out body, into the body of the girl. Her pure young soul had been thrust

back into eternity from whence it came, and into the earthly abode had stepped the soul of the fiend, Dazaar.

But a greater change had been wrought than even Dazaar had wished for. He had become a woman, in verity, with a woman's soul and a woman's heart, and he had ultimately fallen a victim to woman's impulses. He had become *she*, in every fact.

All this she stated and claimed in her confession, with the addition that the soul of a fiend had by this change achieved the longings of a good woman, at least she had learned to love.

In that confession, she had claimed that it was a man who was dead beside her, whom she had loved, for the pride of a thousand years had risen up against her, admitting that it was the man to whom she confessed, who had wrought this change in her.

While Nick was silent, following upon the assertion made by Buck Granger, he turned these things over rapidly in his mind, and he remembered now how strangely she had looked at him whenever he chanced to be in her presence; and he recalled the last time he had seen her alive, only the day before her death, when she had said:

"I go now to solve a mystery which, during ten centuries, I have scorned to know—the mystery which lies the other side of death. But I go there as a woman, and if there is a possibility of return, I shall return as a woman, for in these years while I have been Irma Plavatski, I have acquired two great truths of which I did not dream before. Love is a greater thing than wisdom, and it is better to love than to be loved."

Nick had not thought much about that statement after the time there had been other and far more weighty concerns on his mind; but it returned to him now with full force.

"Buck," he said, presently, "it is now almost one o'clock. Are you sleepy?"

"I'm as wide awake as a weasel," was the reply.

"So am I. Suppose we sit here and smoke and talk till we have talked this subject out—all there is of it."

"Suits me, partner. My broncho is picketed for the night, if this spot suits you for a camping place."

"Well, then, let's start fair."

"How do you mean?"

"Whenever I take a new case in which there seems to be a lot of mystery—that is, which seems inexplicable at the start, I always put myself into that condition of mind where I don't know anything."

"I don't quite catch on, partner."

"I mean this: I have found that we miss a lot of things in this world, by refusing to believe, and when we refuse to believe a thing, it is because we think our knowledge superior to the thing that is told to us. That is one form of egotism."

"I'm limping along close behind you, partner, but here's a cramp in my heel and I can't quite catch up, see?"

"If I run up against a proposition like this one—where a body, that has been buried for a year, is supposed to have come to life again and walked out into the open—it is, of course, absurd, and I refuse to believe it."

"Go on; I'm gaining."

"In this case, it is because I think my own knowledge superior to such a statement. Now, I'm going to open this door—so—and chuck my own knowledge outside—so—and close the door again—so; and, behold, I return to my chair, bereft of all knowledge save that which will tend to enlighten me upon the points at issue. See?"

"The limp is gone. I've caught up. What you mean is, that for the sake of the argument, you are willing to discuss this thing exactly as you would if you believed every day—, every blessed word of it."

"Exactly."

"Good. That is what I call a good beginning."

"Now, suppose you tell me all you know about that tomb business. That is a good place to start. I knew only in an abstract way that Irma had desired you to erect a tomb for her, had provided you with the funds to do it, and that you carried out her wishes. What more was there?"

"There was a lot more, but I can tell it all in a few words. The tomb was to be high and dry above the ground; the walls were to be four feet thick on every

side of it; the casket was of cedar, lined with silk plush; the opening left for the reception of the casket, was to be sealed with the same material as that used in the construction of the tomb itself, so that there should be no visible opening, and there was to be no mark upon it save her given name, Irma, and the year of her death."

"Is that all?"

"Yes; that was all, except the statement she made to me about you."

"What was that?"

"It happened the last time I saw her alive."

"Tell me about it."

"She motioned me to lean down close to her so that she could whisper in my ear, and as I did so, she said: 'Buck, you have done much for me—more than you know or ever will know, perhaps—and I am grateful. You have given me your word that you will see the rest of my directions carried out to the letter, and I know that you will do so—will you not?'

"I assured her that I would, and she continued:

"'It is hard for you to believe that I have seen a thousand years of life in this world, for the thing is so utterly beyond your range of belief; and it is hard for me to realize it, too, since I have become a woman. All that is beyond the period of my womanhood seems to me now, vague and indistinct. It is almost as if I had begun creation anew, this being a woman, and yet I have with me the memory of all that time, to you almost interminable.

"'But, being a woman, I have learned to love, and now I must tell you the truth of whom I love.'

"'Why, it was Tom Chelsea, wasn't it?' I said to her.

"'No,' she replied, 'not Tom Chelsea, but Nick Carter.'

"Then she explained that when she came to New York she had heard so much of your power, shrewdness and strength that she had determined to add you to her list of victims, and it was because you had defied her, had met her on even terms at every point she had made, and had beaten her always, that you had won her heart; and it was then, after she had explained all that, when she added:

"I shall go, Buck, but I shall return. I will seem to have died, but I will live again. The grave cannot hold me, and you, although you know it not, have done that for me since I have been here, which has rendered my return possible. I shall go, but I shall return again to win Nick Carter, and all the power, all the wisdom, all the resources and all the so-called magic of the Thibetan priests shall be mine, when I do return, to win the object I seek."

"And if you should fail?" I asked.

"Then," she replied, "I will drag him down with me into a hell such as these poor worms of men have never dreamed of."

"That was all. She would say no more, and I left her."

"And you never saw her again."

"No. That was the last time I ever saw her alive."

"Not the last time, Buck, if what you have told me to-night is true."

"Well, you know what I mean, all right."

"And you are equally positive in your own mind that you have seen her alive within the last few days?"

"I am as positive in my own mind as I am that I see you at this minute."

"Listen, Buck; I have heard of cases of suspended animation among the East Indian jugglers, where they have allowed themselves to be buried for a considerable time, and then, upon the grave being opened, have come to life again as naturally as if nothing had happened to them. I do not say that this may not be a case of that kind. It is possible that her tomb was opened again, shortly after she was buried in it, and that her body was removed, and so preserved and resuscitated. There was no autopsy—no embalming—nothing of that kind connected with her entombment, was there?"

"Not a thing."

"You referred a moment ago to the time, a year ago, when she traced the characters on your arm. Tell me, did she repeat a ceremony of that kind while you were with her in the cell, before she was supposed to die?"

"Yes."

"Ah!"

"What now, Nick?"

"And as before, there was a period of time when you were unconscious of what you did. I think you begin to see light. I think I begin to understand method of procedure. I begin to realize that she indeed be alive, while we have supposed her dead. I can understand now how her tomb maintained, as you say, and how she may be walking the streets of New York, as well and strong, as calm and relentless, as cruel and as beautiful, as she was a year ago."

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST VICTIM OF DAZAAR.

"Will you tell me what you mean?" asked Buck. "Remember, I do not know what happened to me a year ago, when she traced the characters on my arm in the room where she made her confession to me. She did the same thing to me, a week later, in the cell in prison, and what happened to me at one time must have happened again. What was it?"

"Simply this: In tracing the characters on your forearm, she hypnotized you. While you were hypnotized, she gave you certain orders in the Thibetan tongue, which you carried out implicitly. I happen to know that to be true."

"Well?"

"Great Scott, Buck, don't you understand?"

"Not quite."

"This, then: She directed you exactly how your tomb was to be built. She gave you directions concerning the minutest details. You carried them out to the letter. Then, when she was satisfied that you would do all that for her, she hypnotized you again and sent you on another errand."

"What of that?"

"She could not send written directions out of the prison hospital. She could not give you verbal directions without revealing her plans, but she could hypnotize you and you could transmit her directions without being the wiser, or without imparting them to any

on save the one to whom you were directed; and is what you did do."

But what did I do?"

Why, you simply carried instructions from her to a person in her employ. You told where and how a tomb was to be constructed. You told them, needless to say, to attack that tomb before the mortar which sealed it, was dry and hard."

"Gee-willikins, Jackson! I see it now."

"Of course you do. If our friend, Dazaar, is, as I believe she is, actually alive to-day, she never died at all, that's all. She simply threw herself into an anesthetic hypnotic state—into a condition of suspended animation which so closely resembles death that even the best doctors cannot tell the difference without applying the usual tests. In that condition, she was taken to the tomb, and left there, and, in that condition she was taken from the tomb again, by her agents, the tomb was resealed, and may remain so until the day of resurrection, for it contains—nothing."

Buck started from his chair with an exclamation of surprise, and when the detective turned to him in surprise, he said:

"Well, by thunder, I have at least made you believe that she is alive, and that is more than I dared hope for, do."

"No, Buck, you have not made me actually believe it; you have made me agree that it is possible, however. Remember, I placed myself in the receptive state when I threw all my incredulity out at the door. There are a thousand arguments against this, to one for it."

"But there is one in favor of it, which is unanswerable."

"What is that?"

"The fact that I have seen her."

"And spoken to her, I think you said."

"Yes."

"Did you charge her with being Dazaar?"

"No; but I called her Irma."

"Indeed! And what reply did she make?"

"She stared at me, told me that I had made a mistake, and walked on."

Nick laughed aloud.

"And it is quite probable that you had made a mistake. You know, Buck, it has been said that every person has a double. It is not unlikely that there may be two or three people in the world who look enough like Irma Plavatski to deceive you."

"And you, also?"

"No; I don't think I could be deceived."

"And I don't think I could be deceived in this particular matter, either. I've got a little reason of my own for saying that, which I won't tell you just now."

"I can guess it, Buck. I guessed it long ago. I guessed it when you were building the tomb for her. That is why I left you so undisturbed. But, Buck Granger, the most easily deceived person in the world, is the man in love; don't forget that."

"Well, I was in love with her. I fell in love with her beauty—with her——"

"Hush, Buck! You did nothing of the kind. She had her reasons for desiring you to be in love with her. She made you love her."

"What do you——"

"You never thought about her at all, save to hate her on Tom Chelsea's account, until she had hypnotized you and sent you on her errand; after that, you were in love with her—or thought you were, which is the same thing."

"Then why should she deny herself to me, now, when I have spoken to her?"

"Buck, if it was Irma Plavatski to whom you spoke, rest assured that she wished you to do so."

"You mean?"

"I mean that if that woman is Irma Plavatski, and if all that you have said about her designs upon me is true, she called you to her by making use of the power she held over you, and that she did so for the purpose of sending you to me to report. It was half-past eleven when you rang my bell; how long before that was it when you saw this woman whom you believe to be Irma?"

"I came directly from seeing her—from an encounter with her in the corridor at the Waldorf—to you."

"And you spoke to her there?"

"Certainly."

"Tell me what she said, and what you said."

"She was approaching me along the corridor. There was a man and a woman with her. The man looked like a foreigner, he was dark, and—well, I did not pay much attention to him."

"Probably not. And the woman with her? Can you describe her?"

"She was dark, too, and distinguished looking. Her eyes were black. Her hair had streaks of gray in it. There was a mole on her right cheek. I noticed it, because——"

"Madam Aira, I'll swear!" exclaimed the detective.

"Who?" asked Buck.

"Nobody of whom you ever heard, but a woman who used to be with Irma, long ago. Did she have especially heavy brows, and were her eyes very bright and piercing?"

"That's her to a dot."

"It was Madam Aira. Well, go on. You saw them approaching you; what then?"

"I stepped directly in front of them so that they could not pass, and they stopped, facing me.

"'Irma,' I said, 'you have returned, as you said you would do.'

"She fixed her eyes hard upon me, and said, slowly:

"'You have made a mistake, I think, sir.'

"Then she would have passed on, but I stopped her again.

"'Surely you are Irma Plavatski,' I said. 'I am Buck Granger.'

"She did not reply to me this time, but turned to the woman who was with her, and who, you say, was Madam Aira.

"'Will you be good enough to assure this gentleman that he has made a mistake?' she said; and—well, that is all there was of it. I came away, and presently I came here."

"That was not the first time you have seen her, however?" asked Nick.

"I have seen her a dozen times, I tell you, but I was never so sure before that it was her."

"Tell me where and how."

"I have seen her on the street; in her carriage; in the

big dining room at the Waldorf, for I am living by my own know; I have seen her in a dozen places, by many ways I have not felt sure, until to-night. At first I saw only the resemblance; but I have followed her. I have shadowed her; I have traced her to her home and

"Where is that?"

"It is a house on Fifth Avenue near Seventy-first Street. She has taken the house within the year, furnished. There was a sign upon it the first time I followed her there, but it disappeared before I did there again. I do not know the number. I did not notice it."

"Never mind. You shall point it out to me. I say that she denies the name of Plavatski?"

"Yes."

"What is her name?"

"Princess del Puente."

"Ah!" said Nick. "She is still fond of titles. This woman is, indeed, Irma, she proposes to cling to her title to the last. Look here, Buck."

"Well?"

"I think I will sleep on what you have told me, but I think you had better do the same. We'll make some sort of move in the matter in the morning, just to satisfy our curiosity, eh? In the meantime, I'll think it over. From one point the whole thing is preposterous, but from others, it is tenable. Come; I'll give you my bed, and at breakfast we'll talk it over again."

* * * * *

But there was a surprise awaiting Nick Carter, which came upon him before he had taken his seat at the breakfast table the following morning.

He had just descended the stairs, and was standing in the hall looking over the headings in the newspaper, when the bell rang.

Opening the door quickly, he found standing there a servant from a neighbor's house across the street.

"Oh, Mr. Carter," she said, in an excited tone, "will you please come at once? Something dreadful has happened—something awful, I fear."

"What has happened?" demanded Nick, following her out upon the door step.

ing my mistress—Miss Tempest—has disappeared, sir. I went to her room at midnight, as usual, but when I first to call her a few moments ago, she was not in. The bed has not been disturbed, but she has disappeared—and—oh, what can have happened, sir?"

"God knows!" replied Nick; and then, mentally, he thought: "If Irma Plavatski has returned, and Dazaar is in evidence, there is no telling what may not happen. In striking me, too," he thought on, "Dazaar will attack my friends, and if I know Irma Plavatski well, she would select Cora Tempest for her first victim."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DAGGER, AND THE BLOOD-STAINED BED.

Nick Carter did not wait even to put on his hat, but rushed quickly across the street and entered the house at No. 10, where he discovered the remaining two servants awaiting him in the hall, both looking as frightened as if a murder had been committed in the house. This house had been the home of Cora Tempest when she was a child, and there she had passed her first days; but later her father had moved away to another city, having leased the house for a term of five years. Then he had died, and the daughter had grown up, and remained as a stranger to Nick, so that he had not seen her for years until their acquaintance was suddenly renewed through an unexpected encounter in Chicago.

Acting upon the detective's advice, she had resumed possession of the old home and had returned there to live, and so it was that she had become again a neighbor of the great detective.

And rumor had it that they were still to become closer neighbors.

Twice she had saved Nick Carter's life, and twice he had saved her from death; but he had actually saved her from a fate that was worse than death, and for that—
—but we will wait for the pages of this story to reveal what was in the future for them both.

However, as it was that morning, Cora Tempest was much nearer in Nick Carter's affections than an

ordinary friend, and that was why he had decided so quickly in his own mind, that if Irma Plavatski—or, in other words, Dazaar—was still alive, Cora Tempest would be selected for her first victim.

He knew only too well the habit of Dazaar, to strike others through their hearts. He remembered that it had been a boast of Dazaar's that the most effective manner in which to make others suffer, was to strike them through their affections, and he gritted his teeth together as he ascended the stairs, thinking of the revelations which Buck Granger had made to him, and of this announcement of the disappearance of Cora Tempest, following upon it so soon.

The thought uppermost in his mind then, was this:

"If Irma Plavatski has come back from the grave—if she has come back determined to conquer me or kill me, why then her first effort will be directed toward depriving me, one by one, of every person I hold dear in the world. She will seek to isolate me effectually, from everybody I love. She will strike at Cora; she will attack Chick and Patsy; she will reach out that shadowy arm of hers through the darkness, and pluck out of existence, each person who is near and dear to me, until I stand alone with only her to say that she—— Faugh! I talk like a schoolboy!"

The maid who had summoned him, followed him to Cora's room, but paused at the doorway in response to a commanding gesture made by the detective for her to remain there.

"Wait there until I call you," he said; and he stopped in the middle of the room and swept his eyes over it from end to end, in a close, searching gaze from which nothing was omitted.

Then, without moving, he questioned the maid.

"You say that Miss Tempest came to her room at midnight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did she come alone?"

"No, sir. I came with her."

"Did she undress?"

"No; she dismissed me at once. She said she would read and that she would not require my services again."

"And you left her then?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did not return to the room after that?"

"No, sir."

"Did you notice how long after that the light burned in her room?"

"No. I went to bed at once."

"Where was she when you left the room? Had she taken her seat, or selected her book at that time?"

"No. She was standing in the middle of the floor, where you are now, sir."

"With her back toward you, as I am?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what book she was reading, or intended to read?"

"It is there on the table near the window now, sir. I can see it from here—where I placed it when I cared for the room yesterday."

Nick crossed the floor and picked up the book.

It opened easily, almost at the center, and Nick noticed that one of the leaves was badly crumpled, as if it had been seized suddenly between the fingers, as one might do if startled while reading it.

"When you arranged the room yesterday, Martha, was the book open, or closed?"

"It was open, sir. I closed it and placed a mark in it so that she could find her place."

"What did you use for a mark?"

"A scrap of paper torn from an envelope, sir."

The detective stooped and picked up from the floor a scrap of paper such as Martha described. Then he crossed to the doorway and showed it to her.

"Is that what you marked the book with?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. You will find the envelope from which I tore it, upon the table now, I think."

"No," said Nick, returning, "the envelope is gone. There is no blue envelope here. There are several others, however, but not one that is blue. Did you notice that a leaf of the book was mussed when you placed the mark inside it?"

"No."

"When you came here with Miss Tempest last night,

did you open the bed for her?"

"No, sir. I started to do so, but she told me no mind; that she would attend to it when she was ready to retire."

"So, as a matter of fact, you did nothing, save to come to the door with her."

"I turned on the lights; that is all."

"You did not touch the bed?"

"No, sir."

"Who made the bed up, yesterday morning?"

"I did."

"Could you tell if it had been disturbed?"

"Certainly I could, sir."

"Well, examine it. Do it slowly, while I look. Tell me if you find anything different from the manner in which you left it."

Martha approached the bed and began slowly to turn back the covers while the detective stood close by her elbow, watching every move she made.

But she had done very little in the way of examination before she turned to him with a startled cry.

"Miss Tempest used the bed, sir," she asserted. "The covers have been turned back; they are not ranged as I left them."

"And the pillow has been used also," said Nick. "I can see that. Now pull the clothes all the way back. Let us see if she actually got into the bed."

Martha pulled the covers back with a jerk, and then she uttered a scream and leaped away from the bed, so suddenly that she collided with the detective; but he pushed her aside, and stepping forward quickly, seized upon the article that had alarmed her while at the same time he threw the covers entirely from the bed, thus exposing a sight which chilled even him, to the marrow.

The article that had so startled Martha was a peculiarly shaped knife, unlike in pattern, to the products of any known manufacturer. It was a knife, of that strange pattern and weight, of which Dazaar had once seemed to possess an unlimited supply, and it had been left, evidently for him to discover, beside the bed and at a point about two feet down from the edge of the covers.

"The signal of Dazaar!" was the exclamation uttered

by the detective when his eyes lighted upon it, had not, at that instant, expected to discover any worse than that terrible weapon, in the bed; when the covers were thrown entirely away, even with his strong heart that quailed at nothing, shuddered—and well he might do so.

beginning at a point near where the dagger was and extending almost to the foot of the bed, was a smear of clotted blood, still wet from recent shedding.

had dyed the sheets, upper and lower, for the breadth of a human body—as if some person lying there had been stabbed to death in their arms. Martha, the maid, after that first exclamation of terror and her leap backward, stood gazing upon the sight with horror in her eyes, and with quaking knees and trembling hands, as if she had suddenly been stricken with the palsy.

For a moment even Nick Carter was appalled; but his great courage and fortitude came to the rescue, and he straightened himself to the work in hand. Turning to Martha, he said, commandingly:

"Go to your own room, my girl, and remain there. I call you. I will question you later. But mind you say nothing of what we have discovered, until I give you leave."

"Oh, do not send me away," she wailed. "I am afraid."

"Very well," replied Nick. "Sit over there near the window, and do not speak or move until I give you leave. I shall work as if you were not here."

His first act after that was to examine the dagger; it could tell him nothing, save that it was smeared with blood, and had evidently been left there intentionally.

"It is evident that some person has been in this bed," he mused, "and that person is, of course, Cora Tempest; but was Cora murdered while she was lying in the bed? I think not."

"I do not think she has been injured, for of what use would it be to a person who had killed her. to leave the body away after it had been bereft of life?

That would be a useless and a thankless task, as well as an unnecessarily dangerous one.

"No; all this has been carefully arranged for the purpose of giving the impression that she has been stabbed to death, while in reality she is kept alive for other purposes. Now I will proceed to prove that much. The bed hasn't at all the appearance it would have if a person had regularly retired in it, and I doubt, from the looks of things, if she even removed her clothes and put on her night dress. However, we will see. It looks to me as if she was surprised while reading, and, doubtless, soon after she came to her room. The fiend, or fiends, were already here, awaiting her, and—but I must not jump at conclusions; I must prove them."

CHAPTER V.

THE MURDER OF ABRAHAM BEN.

"Martha!" he called.

"Yes, sir," she replied, rising precipitately from her chair and crossing the room toward him.

"Do you remember what dress Miss Tempest wore when you came to the room with her last night?"

"Certainly, sir. It was——"

"Never mind; see if you can find it."

A thorough search of the closets in the room failed to discover the dress, or any article of apparel which accompanied it, and the detective nodded in approval.

"It is possible that the murderers, or pretended murderers, whichever they are, might have taken the clothing with them also," he mused, "so we will continue the search." Then to the maid:

"Find Miss Tempest's night dress if it is there; the one she would have worn last night."

"I have already looked for it; it is gone, sir."

"Gone, eh? What else is missing? Her shoes?"

"No, sir; they are all here."

"Her slippers?"

"One pair is missing; but I remember now that she was wearing that pair last evening."

"Come over here to the dressing case and see if you think she did anything to her hair after you left her."

"No, sir," replied Martha, after a close inspection. "Everything here is as I arranged the dresser myself, yesterday. I don't think she has touched it."

"Good. Brace up, Martha. I don't think your mistress has been injured. This looks to me like a bluff; but, of course, we cannot be sure. Are you getting over your fright?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go to your room and wait there for me. I will find you when I want you. I wish to be alone."

"Yes, sir. You do not think that she has been—killed?"

"No, Martha, I do not. If they had killed her, they would not have taken the trouble to remove the body; it would have been unnecessary, unless they had some reason which I cannot guess."

"Then what has become of her, sir? And how did it all happen?"

"Wait a moment," replied Nick. "You need not go to your room. You may sit in that chair near the window and I will talk to you while I work. Sometimes I can work better and faster that way; it helps me to concentrate if I utter aloud the thoughts which occur to me—only don't interrupt."

"I won't speak unless you ask me to do so, sir."

"Good girl. However, when I end what I have to say with a question, you may answer. Now let us begin at the beginning:

"It was exactly twelve o'clock when you came to this room with Miss Tempest, was it not?"

"Five minutes before twelve by her little clock, over there—"

"Hello," said Nick. "That's funny! It is five minutes before twelve by that clock, now, so that tells us nothing. Did you notice what time it was when you got to your room?"

"Just twelve, sir."

"Don't you keep that clock—the one in your room exactly with this one?"

"Always, sir."

"Then it didn't take you five minutes to go from this room to your own, did it?"

"Not more than half a minute at most."

"Are you sure about it's being just twelve when you got to your room?"

"Certainly, sir. My clock was striking at the time. I remembered that this clock was not so fast, and stopped the pendulum in mine and tried to count minutes, as nearly as I could, in order to have it act like this one."

"Humph! When are these clocks wound, Martha?"

"Every Friday morning; that is, they were last wound yesterday morning. In fact, I wound them myself."

"So it isn't likely that this one would have stopped at five minutes before twelve, unless somebody had stopped it, eh?"

"I have never known it to stop before, sir."

"Then it was stopped. Now who stopped it, Martha?"

"I'm sure—"

"Never mind. I'm only thinking aloud. I'll get into that clock matter again in a moment. Now, instead of being five minutes before twelve when you came to this room with Miss Tempest, it must have been, in reality, about two minutes, or one minute before twelve, eh? And in that case, the clock had been stopped about three minutes when you opened the door of this room. You say you came in and turned on the lights for your mistress. Was there not already light here?"

"There was only one; I turned on three more."

"And after doing that, you returned to the doorway and you say that your mistress stood here, in the middle of the room, with her back toward you, while you were there."

"Yes."

"Was that her habit—to stand with her back toward you while she was giving her directions?"

"Not at all."

"What did she seem to be looking at?"

"I did not notice. Nothing in particular, I think. She seemed to be thinking. I paid no attention."

"Naturally. Where was Miss Tempest during the half hour that immediately preceded her coming to this room?"

"In the library."

"And where were you?"

"I was with her."

"Where were the other servants?"

"They had retired."

"Did any stranger come to the door last evening?"

"No, sir. The bell did not ring during the entire evening."

"How long a time were you in the library with Miss Tapest, last evening?"

"From halfpast nine until I went with her to her room."

"Was it your habit to sit there with her?"

"No, sir. She asked me to do so last night."

"Why did she do that?"

"She said she was nervous. And that reminds me, —"

"Of what?"

"I know now where the letter in the blue envelope is—the one from which I tore off the scrap of paper with which to mark her book, you remember."

"Yes; what of it?"

"It was that letter which made her nervous. She told me to bring it to her when we went into the library. It must be there now, for she read it through, a dozen times at least, while we were sitting in the library last evening. Shall I get it?"

"Wait. Tell me what she said about it."

"She said: 'Martha, you may sit here with me to-night. I want company. I am nervous over nothing at all—over a mere letter to which the writer was afraid to sign her name. Get it. I will show it to you. It is in a blue envelope on the table near the window in my room.'"

"And you got the letter?"

"Yes; but she forgot to show it to me."

"What did she do?"

"She read it over many times, frowning as she did so. At last she put it aside and took up a book, but she did not read; she seemed to be thinking about the letter."

"And I suppose you think that her mind was still on

the letter when she stood with her back toward you after she came into this room, eh?"

"Why, yes; that is my idea."

"Now, what else did she do, or essay to do, while you were together in the library?"

"Once she rose from her chair, and crossed to the table, and there she pulled a sheet of paper in front of her, and dipped a pen in the ink; but I am sure she wrote nothing."

"It is quite evident that the letter disturbed her, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I think she was greatly moved by it."

The detective ceased to question the maid, but crossed to the mantel upon which the clock rested, and taking from his pocket a strong magnifying glass, began to make a close inspection of the shelf, the clock, and everything pertaining to them, or that was near them.

Presently he turned away again and seemed to study the room and its arrangement with exceeding care; and then, quite suddenly he crossed to one corner of the room where a huge leather couch stood across the corner so that there was quite a space behind it.

Here, again, he made use of his glass, running it rapidly but carefully along the edges of the couch, and then, having stepped over behind it, devoted considerable time to a careful examination of the floor behind it.

Next, he returned to the blood-stained bed, and here his glass was operated only along the wide-hemmed top of the sheet; but twice, while he was so employed, he nodded his head as if he were pleased with something he had discovered.

"Who dusts this room, Martha?" he asked, presently.

"I do, sir."

"You haven't dusted the under side or the back of that couch in some time, have you?"

"Why, sir, I—I——"

"Never mind. I am very glad that you have not. I will tell you why, presently."

Then he turned toward the closet door—the very closet into which Martha had already searched among

the gowns for the dress that Cora Tempest had been known to wear the preceding day.

This closet was very large and roomy. Besides being provided with many hooks and other devices for the accommodation of Miss Tempest's gowns and wearing apparel, there was a case of drawers and a goodly sized cupboard also, within it.

Nick did not open any of these drawers, nor did he inspect the interior of the cupboard, but he operated his glass carefully along the edges of each, while a grim smile began to appear slowly upon his features.

Presently he stepped out of the closet again and closed the door behind him.

"Martha," he said, "where is Abou Ben, Miss Tempest's Persian cat? Have you seen him this morning?"

"No, sir. Indeed I have not. I had not thought of him at all."

"Where was he last night, while you were in the library?"

"Why, he was there with us, sir. He slept in my lap most of the evening."

"And when your mistress came upstairs to retire, what became of him?"

"She brought him up here in her arms. She was holding him when she dismissed me for the night."

"Exactly. Where is Abou Ben, now?"

"I am sure, sir, that I do not know. I had totally forgotten him. Where can he be?"

"I'll tell you where he is. He is in one of those drawers in the closet, dead. Stop! Wait, Martha. I am going down with you to the library after a moment, but first I want to relieve your mind about your mistress, for while she may be somewhat frightened, I do not think that she has been injured."

"Oh, sir——"

"Wait. That blood upon the bed, is the blood of Abou Ben, the Persian cat. He was a faithful animal, Martha, for he attacked the persons who would have injured your mistress; he attacked them with claws and teeth, and he left his mark upon one of them, what is more."

"I am glad of that."

"So am I, for the fact will assist me in tracing the gentleman who was here; and there were two persons here, Martha—two. They were here when you came to the room with Miss Tempest; they were hiding her then, waiting for you to get out of the way. They would have left no traces whatever behind them had not been for Abou Ben, and we would not have had a tangible clue to what has become of her, but for the faithful cat—unless, perhaps, there may be one in that letter. But as it is, Abou Ben gave up his life in defense of his mistress, and, in doing so, defeated the purpose of her enemies."

"Come! Lock the door until I return. I am through here, for the present."

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAIL, THE VILLAINS LEFT BEHIND THEM

There was no sign of any letter in the library, however, and but for the scrap of paper with which the book had been marked, and which had been found on the floor near the table in Cora Tempest's room, there would have been no evidence save the assertion of the maid, that such a letter had existed at all.

The fact that it was not present in the library, added, however, an extra link to the chain of circumstances which Nick Carter had been weaving together.

He devoted another quarter of an hour to a careful and methodical inspection of the library with his glass, and when that was completed, called Miss Tempest's servants around him.

"Miss Tempest has been abducted forcibly from her room by people who were concealed there when she went upstairs to retire last night," he said. "I shall send one of my own people over here to take charge of things immediately, and I wish you all to remain here as if nothing had happened and to say nothing whatever to anybody. I will return here before night-fall and give you further directions."

With this admonition he left the house and crossed the street to his own home, where he found Buck

Granger, with Chick and Patsy, already assembled at the breakfast table.

"When I have eaten something, I wish to have a serious talk with all of you," he announced; and then he proceeded with his breakfast.

Presently pushing back his chair, he addressed himself to Chick.

"I don't know whether Mr. Granger has told you what brought him here or not," he said, "but he came here to tell me that Dazaar is on the carpet again—that Irma Plavatski has come to life—that devil worship will receive another impetus in this locality—that the life, or, at least, the liberty and happiness of everyone of us in this room, is in imminent peril, and that to put it in a very applicable slang term, we are up against it hard.

"Chick—and you, too, Patsy—I will have more work for you to do, for the next few days, than you have done in a long time, and both of you must have eyes on the backs of your heads while you are doing it. Now, Buck——"

"Present, partner."

"When you saw the princess, as she calls herself, at the Waldorf last night, did you leave there almost immediately for this house?"

"No; it must have been a half hour after that."

"Did you happen to look behind you while you were on your way here?"

"No; I don't think I did."

"Then you don't know if you were followed?"

"Only that I have been convinced for a week past that I have been followed everywhere I have gone."

"Well, last night was not an exception, only it is highly probable that you were followed by a person or persons in a carriage, instead of by somebody on foot."

"Oh! As for that——"

"Well?"

"A carriage did turn into this street behind me. The horses were walking. I did not notice it particularly; but if I am not mistaken, it drew up against the curb on the other side of the street not a dozen doors from this house."

"Exactly. Well, two persons got out of that carriage, and——"

"How in blazes do you know that when you were inside the house with me, and we went directly to your study and staid there till after two o'clock this morning?"

"Never mind that; listen. That carriage followed you from the Waldorf, and those who were inside it had two objects in view. One was to discover your destination, and the other was to enter, by stealth, a house on the opposite side of the street."

Nick paused a second, and then turning to Chick, added:

"Miss Tempest was abducted from her own room, last night, and the thing was done so quietly, that there was not a suspicion that she was gone until the maid went to call her this morning. Now, Chick, I want you to attend closely while I tell you what I have already discovered, and then I want your version of the affair. Patsy, yours, also."

"We're ready," replied Chick.

"Miss Tempest and her maid passed the evening in the library. You, Buck, arrived here about half-past eleven, and, therefore, the carriage from which her abductors descended, must have stopped in front of the houses on the other side of the street, at, say, eleven-thirty-five."

"About that, I should say," agreed Buck.

"At eleven-forty, then, they used a skeleton latch-key and entered the home of Miss Tempest——"

"Good God, Nick!" exclaimed Granger, "do you mean to say that——"

"Wait, Buck. Let me go on."

"Excuse me. I was frightened."

"And well you might be. At eleven-forty, then, they used a skeleton key and entered that house. Miss Tempest was in the library with her maid. They listened long enough to ascertain that fact, for I know that they passed through the hall and went quite near to the library door before they ascended the stairs. There were two, as I have said. One was a man and the other a woman. The man is a cigarette smoker, and he must have pulled his handkerchief from his

pocket, and in that way dropped the broken half of an Egyptian cigarette in the hall. At least, I found it there—and I discovered the other half of it in the room above, where they were in hiding later.

"These two, the man and the woman, ascended the stairs to Miss Tempest's room, where they intended to hide and wait for her.

"It was not difficult for them to determine that the servants, with the single exception of the maid, were in bed, so they had no fear of interruption.

"Nevertheless, the room afforded no good place for hiding, unless they concealed themselves in the large closet that is in the room; but they did not wish to hide there, for the reason that the maid was more than likely to go to the closet for her mistress' things as soon as they entered the room, and thus the intruders would be discovered.

"The only remaining place where they could hide was behind the big, leather couch which stands in one corner of the room. It has a high back and stands out from the wall; but all the same, a person who sought to conceal himself behind it would be obliged to crouch in an uncomfortable attitude, and, therefore, no person would desire to remain there a minute longer than was absolutely necessary.

"The two agreed upon this point, and as there was no fear of interruption save from the intended victim and her maid, then in the library, they left the door of the room ajar so they could hear, and thus he made aware of Miss Tempest's approach when she should decide to retire.

"Now, all this arrangement and argument, the listening at the door, ascending the stairs, inspecting the room and closet, and so forth, occupied just ten minutes."

"How in ——" began Buck; but Nick raised his hand and stopped him.

"One of the intruders—the man it was—crossed the room and stopped the clock. He did it by opening the little glass door in front of the pendulum, and stopping its swinging."

"Would you mind, Nick, telling me how you know

it was the man who did it?" demanded Buck, who could not keep silent.

"Because, although the room had been thoroughly dusted, sufficient dust had collected on the bronze of the clock to show where fingers had touched it. I know that those fingers belonged to the man, for the same reason that I know how to tell the difference between a ball club and a lead pencil."

"But why did they stop the clock?"

"Well, there are two reasons for that. One is, the intruders were Orientals, and Orientals are unused to clocks. The ticking of a clock annoys them; another is that that particular clock ticks very loudly, and, inasmuch as they could not make themselves unconscious of its sound, as you or I would naturally do, because we are accustomed to it, the sound seemed to them extraordinary, and so interfered with their hearing while listening for the approaching footsteps they expected. So they stopped the clock."

"I see," said Buck.

"Do you agree with me, Chick?" asked Nick.

"Perfectly."

"They had not long to wait. The clock had scarcely been stopped when the library door opened, and the two leaped behind the big couch.

"The carpet in that room, Chick, is a fine Wilton with an unusually heavy and soft pile. That part of it which is behind the couch, is rarely trodden upon, and it receives and holds quite perfectly, the impression of a foot pressed upon it.

"In this case it had preserved the impression of hands as well: four hands and four feet. Two of the hands and two of the feet are very small and shapely. The others are somewhat larger, but are also small, showing that I am not mistaken in my conjecture of the Oriental phase of my story. Did you notice the hands and the feet of the man you saw with the princess, Buck?"

"Can't say that I did, Carter. I didn't see much but the woman."

"Well, never mind. Behind the couch I found one rather short, but intensely black hair. Does the man wear a beard, Buck?"

Yes; trimmed to a point—no, to two points.”
 “Very well; I found the hair; I found the other
 end of the cigarette; I found a thread, a raveling which
 must have come from—and probably did—one of the
 heavy curtains in the Turkish room at the Waldorf.
 It had clung to the garments of the woman and had
 been pulled off against the clinging pile of the carpet when
 she knelt upon it.”

“Now, Chick, it was probably the purpose of these
 things to chloroform, or otherwise stupify Miss Tempest,
 and to take her out of the house to the carriage, and
 away, without leaving a trace of any kind behind
 her.”

“They would have been foiled in that effort, in any
 case, by what they had already dropped, in the shape
 of cigarettes and ravelings; but they were to be foiled
 in their designs in another way.”

“Miss Tempest carried her pet cat, a Persian, to her
 room with her. The cat is devoted to her. When
 Miss Tempest sent her maid away, she crossed the
 hall to the table near the window and settled herself
 to read.”

“The cat was, however, uneasy. He scented the
 presence of strangers in the room, and the wild blood
 of the man was aroused; but by he knew not what. How-
 ever, we will say that he wandered around the room
 until at last he poked his nose behind the couch, and
 there, presumably, he growled.”

“There are two or three little specks of blood on
 the carpet behind the couch, which demonstrates either
 that one of the persons who was hiding there, pricked
 the animal with a dagger in order to frighten it away,
 or that he or she seized it and the cat scratched back.”

“It is certain, whatever occurred, that it was suffi-
 cient to startle Miss Tempest so that she half crumpled
 the leaf of the book upon which her hand was resting,
 and doubtless called to the cat, and at last placed the
 book on the table and crossed to the couch to ascer-
 tain what was the matter.”

“It was then that the man and the woman sprang
 upon her. I discovered that by the roughed condition
 of the pile of the velvet carpet, which shows that there
 was a momentary struggle, I know that it lasted only

a moment. They found some way of reducing her
 to silence, possibly with chloroform, or one of their
 Eastern drugs.

“In that short struggle they were forced against the
 bed with some violence, for it is moved at least three
 inches from its place. That, also, I discovered from
 an examination of the carpet. They straightened the
 bed after it was moved, but they did not get it back
 exactly into place, as the maid would have done, who
 has a regular socket in the carpet for the reception of
 each castor.

“Also, in the struggle, the coverings of the bed were
 disturbed; otherwise they would not have disturbed
 it at all, but would have placed their victim on the
 couch as soon as she became unconscious. Now, how-
 ever, the bed was already mussed, and they simply
 raised her from the floor to put her on the bed, when
 the man, having in mind their original plans to dis-
 turb nothing, seized the covers and drew them back,
 so they could be replaced later without the appearance
 of having been disturbed.”

“Geewhizz!” said Granger. “A fellow would think
 that you were there and saw it all.”

“I might as well have been, for I can see it all
 now,” smiled Nick.

“How do you know that it was the man who pulled
 the covers back—and how do you know that they were
 pulled back at all? Will you tell me that?”

“Certainly. I know the man did it, because it was
 he who first moved the couch, and he left some of
 the smudge from the dust on the under side of the
 couch, upon the wide hem of the sheet; and I know
 the covers were pulled back, because in the bed I found
 one of Dazaar’s daggers, and also—a perfect welter of
 fresh blood, staining both sheets.”

CHAPTER VII.

UP AGAINST A HARD GAME.

Chick, Patsy and Buck Granger leaped to their feet
 as with one impulse.

“Wait,” said the detective. “If Cora Tempest had
 been murdered, I would not be sitting here in this quiet

way, telling you about it. She has only been abducted. She is in great danger—in imminent danger—I have no doubt, but the quickest way to find her is to think, and to reason. I can accomplish nothing by rushing pell-mell into the street and searching around the corners.

"When Buck Granger told me last night that Irma Plavatski was alive, I laughed at him. It is not yet eight o'clock in the morning, and I have not seen her; but, all the same, I am satisfied that she lives, and that she has declared a second warfare against me."

"But where did that blood come from?" demanded Buck.

"The cat."

"The devil it did! Do you mean to say that they killed the cat in order to make you, or anybody, suppose they had killed Miss Tempest?"

"No. They killed the cat because they had to kill it."

"How did they have to kill it?"

"Remember, they prodded the cat while it was under the couch, and the cat, doubtless hurt as well as frightened, retired to some corner and watched the subsequent proceedings until it saw its mistress laid out on the bed as if she were dead. Cats are curious animals. I know of cases where they have fought savagely for a person they happened to love.

"It is certain, at all events, that the cat attacked them. It leaped upon the bed, and it bit and scratched like a good fellow, too, until one of them drove the dagger into its vitals, not once, but many times. There are several little hairs from the cat's fur upon that dagger, and it is safe to say that there is some of the cat's blood upon the clothing of all three of the persons who were present there.

"Now, Chick, they lifted Miss Tempest from the bed and put her on the couch. Then they made up the bed with great care, covering the blood and forgetting the dagger—and then they quietly carried their victim down the stairs, out of the house, to the carriage, and drove away."

"What did they do with the cat?"

"Did it in a drawer in the closet. I have not looked

for it yet, but I will later. I wanted particularly leave everything as I discovered it, for you to see. We will go there together, presently."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes; one thing more. I think that Irma, following her old practice, had written a letter to Cora Tempest."

"Why do you think that?"

"The maid tells me that her mistress received a letter which disturbed her greatly. Cora called me on the phone last evening and asked if I would be in there a moment this morning, saying she had a letter she wished to show to me, but she did not say what it was. She read such a letter over several times while she was in the library last night, but a trace of that letter could be found."

"What became of it?"

"Doubtless she carried it upstairs with her. Perhaps she placed it on the table near which she was seated. If so, Irma saw and recognized it as her own, and simply took it away with her—which is doubtless the case."

"What do you suppose the letter contained?"

"If it was from Irma Plavatski, it contained a threat. Don't you remember how fond she was of writing letters, telling her plans? Crime has no alternatives for her, save when she can also terrify her intended victim. It was so with Dr. Quartz, if you remember; it is so with Dazaar; it is so always with that class of criminals who think they have reached their avocations to a science. It is the outward manifestation of their egotism—in fact, more than that, their egoism."

"What is the next step we must take?" continued Chick.

"Find Cora Tempest."

"Well, if we know so well who has taken her away, what is easier——"

"Not so fast, Chick. We're up against a hard game this time. This is a different proposition from the last one."

"How so?"

"Dazaar—or Irma Plavatski, whichever we choose."

"all her—has evidently decided to meet me on my ground this time."

"I don't understand."

"She intends to make her fight in the open."

"But my dear Nick, how in the world can she do

"If you know who she is and where she is, what prevent —"

"I know who she is and where she is. She is doubt-taking breakfast at her palatial home on Fifth Avenue at this very moment. Later in the day she appear again in the corridors of the Waldorf, where she will not hesitate to meet me face to face, and over again."

"Then what is to prevent you from arresting her on the spot?"

"Who shall I arrest, Chick? The Princess delance? That is the name she has assumed."

"Certainly."

"Upon what charge?"

"This one. The abduction of Cora Tempest."

"Hasn't it occurred to you how utterly absurd such thing would be? She would laugh at me—and with good reason."

"At least there are old charges enough against her. She is Irma Plavatski."

"Irma Plavatski is dead, Chick."

"Great Scott! I had forgotten that. You have first to prove that she isn't dead, haven't you?"

"Yes; and I'd just as soon attempt to prove that the world is square."

"Or the people in it," interpolated Granger, with a grin. "Do you know, Mr. Carter, I think there is only one way for you to get at her."

"How is that, Buck?"

"Go right straight to her and face her down."

"I've been thinking of that."

"Do you suppose she has taken Miss Tempest to her house on Fifth Avenue?" asked Patsy.

"Hardly. No, I don't think she would do that. She would have another place to conceal her—and torture her."

"Good Heaven, Nick, do you think she would do that?" asked Chick.

"I haven't a doubt of it. She will find a way to torture Cora, mentally and physically. She will, perhaps, scar her face and so destroy her beauty, which is even greater than her own."

"Will you let me search that house on Fifth Avenue?" asked Patsy. "She might be there, and if the house has a door, I'll find a way to get inside of it."

"Remember the maiden of steel, Patsy, and think what you risk," replied Nick.

"Blow the maiden of steel, and Irma Plavatski, too! I'm not afraid of her. Shall I go?"

"Yes; go."

"Where is the house?"

"Mr. Granger will tell you. Now, Chick; you next. What do you suggest?"

"First," replied Chick, promptly, "that we give Buck Granger a job in the matter."

"Good," assented Nick, who saw that it was Chick's idea to get Buck out of the house so that they might be alone. "Buck, do you think you could capture that foreign devil who was with your sweetheart last night?"

"Look here, Carter," replied Granger, rising slowly to his feet, "you won't mind, will you, if I ask you not to joke me on that point? I might get dead stuck on keeping a pet tiger cub, but I'd be mighty careful of his claws just the same. I'm not in love with Irma Plavatski; I'm just fascinated by her, that's all; the same way you might be fascinated by a snake; or the same way you might be compelled to jump off of a great height when you was all the time mighty certain that the fall would kill you. Now, if you are in earnest, I'll answer you. If you mean, do I think I would like to, I could do it in a——"

"No, no! That isn't what I mean. All the same, if I could have him or her where I could hold five minutes private conversation with either of them, I'd like it."

"Well, you've got the chance," called Patsy from the window, "for if Irma Plavatski isn't in her grave, that's her getting out of her carriage at the door, now."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRISONER ON THE FOURTH FLOOR.

It was only a moment later when the bell rang, and presently the servant brought a card to the detective.

"A lady in a carriage at the door, sir," he said.

"She wishes to know if it is too early for you to receive her?"

"Not at all," replied Nick, glancing at the card, and perceiving that it bore the name which Granger had said Irma Plavatski had now assumed—that of the Princess del Puente. "Take her to the reception room and say that I will be there at once."

"Now," said Chick, when the servant had gone, "what do you make of this?"

"Bluff," replied Nick.

"Do you suppose that she intends to acknowledge herself to you?"

"Perhaps. She might be safe enough, even at that, inasmuch as we would be alone. There would be no witnesses. Don't forget Chick, that you cannot now, or ever, make the world believe that the woman who was buried over a year ago, has come to life again. Patsy."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Granger will show you where that house is now. Go at once. Go with him, Buck, and point out the house, will you?"

"Sure. But I would like to see this thing out."

"You shall see it out. Come back here when you have shown Patsy what he wants to know."

"I'll do it."

As soon as they had left the room, Nick turned to Chick.

"Now, lad," he said, "the work begins. While I am talking with her, I want you to make up so that the devil himself could not tell you from me, when I have not the shadow of a disguise. When you have done that, don't wait for instructions, but pike for the Waldorf at once. I'll show up there, presently, myself, and we'll be twins. I've got an idea, and if it works out, it will be a corker."

"You don't think you will need me here?"

"No; not here. But I will need you there. I know why this woman has come here to see me; the whole point of it is that she has come alone. While she is talking with me here, I want to be seen there."

Nick turned away without another word and presently entered the reception room, where his caller had been told to await him.

As he entered, she rose from the chair in which she had been seated, and she looked at him with an expectant gaze in which there was not one atom of recognition.

And Nick Carter, on his part, showed as little.

It was as if two total strangers had met, now, for the first time; and yet, Nick was positive that he was in the presence of none other than the woman he had known a year ago as Irma Plavatski, who had confessed herself to be Dazaar, and who had died and been buried in a tomb at Woodlawn.

Yet, here she was.

He was positive that it was she, and no other.

Not a whit of her exquisite and almost matchless beauty had left her. There were the same glorious eyes; the same perfect features; the same mobile mouth with its double row of perfect teeth; the same wealth of beautiful hair; the same dainty poise of her queenly head—ah! it was all the same, for even just under her hair near her right temple where it could scarcely be seen at all, Nick looked for and discovered a tiny mark which he knew should be there if this woman were indeed Irma.

But he was determined if it was her game not to know him, he would be equally unsuspecting of her identity.

That was a game which two might play, and he was quite willing to match himself against her in any game.

"Well, madam," he said, "you wished to see me."

"Yes—if you are Mr. Nick Carter."

"I am that person, madam. What can I do for you?"

"I wish to engage your services in rather an unusual way, I think," she said, smiling brightly upon him.

"Yes?" he said. "As a matter of fact, almost all

"Cases are unusual. I doubt if yours can be any stranger than the others. What is it?"

"I have been intensely annoyed of late by the fact that I am constantly mistaken for a person of whom I have never heard at all until less than a week ago. I have been stopped on the street and addressed by that name. I have been accosted in the corridors of hotels by persons who have insisted that I am not what I appear to be, but am another person entirely. In reality, the thing has gone beyond endurance, and yesterday I appealed to the police."

"Indeed! And the police sent you to me, I suppose."

"Yes; I was directed to come to you."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"I wish you to find this other person for me."

"The person for whom you are mistaken?"

"Yes."

"Suppose, in that case, you tell me the name of that other person. You have, as yet, neglected to mention it."

"The name is Irma Plavatski. Have you heard the name before?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you knew the woman. The police, I think, said that you had known her."

"Yes; I knew her."

"Do I look like her?"

"Somewhat."

"Really? Do you think you could find her for me?"

"Possibly I might find what is left of her. She is dead."

"Dead! Dear me! How dreadful! Since when?"

"A year ago, or more."

"Horror! Do not these people who mistake me for her, know that she is dead?"

"They should know it."

"Then why do you suppose they persist in insisting that I am that person?"

"I am sure that I could not answer that question—unless, perhaps, it referred to one particular person whom I happen to know."

"Who is that?"

"A certain Mr. Granger, who also knew the person for whom you have been mistaken."

"Indeed! Possibly he was one of those who have insisted that I am she."

"Quite likely."

"There is one man in particular who has addressed me over and over again. I wonder if he is the one to whom you refer."

"Possibly."

"A very large man, fine-looking—and Western."

"That sounds like him."

"Why should he insist that I am this Miss Plavatski? Does he not know that she is dead?"

"Certainly he knows it; but he insists that she warned him that she should come to life again, and I believe he has expected her to do so. He doubtless thinks that you are a resurrected body, fresh from the grave."

"Horrible! How really dreadful! And shocking, isn't it?"

"Quite so, madam."

"Is the man crazy?"

"Not at all, I assure you."

"But what am I to do?"

"About what?"

"About this dead woman for whom I am so constantly mistaken?"

"I haven't an idea; unless you choose to leave the city."

"But I cannot do that—just now. It would be very inconvenient. Could you tell me something about this dead woman?"

"Why, yes; a little. For example, I doubt if there was ever another person, man or woman, born into the world, who was or is so hopelessly bad to the core, as was Irma Plavatski. She was so intensely bad that the thought of her engenders nothing but loathing."

"Ah! How terrible! And I resemble her. Horrible! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

She rose from her chair and stood before the detective, Irma Plavatski to the life, and Nick, in the rage he felt for her at that instant, could almost have struck her down.

And then, while he endeavored to control himself so that no trace of the hatred he felt would appear on his features, thought suddenly of a way out of the present dilemma.

"Madam," he said, "if you will follow me I will show you a life-size portrait of this Irma Plavatski. It was made by one of my assistants who is now in Japan one who was called Ten Ichi. Would you care to see it?"

"Indeed, I should, sir."

"I regret that I cannot bring it to you, but it is so large that I will have to ask you to go to it instead; and it is at the top of the house."

"I would wish to see it if it were twice as high and far away," she replied, and she followed him toward the door.

Without another word Nick turned and led the way from the reception room, through the hallway and up the stairs; thence around the balustrade and up the second flight, and then still up another flight to the top floor; and she followed after, without complaint.

Directly at the top of the last flight of stairs, he opened a door which led into the middle room of the house, and pressing a button on the outside, flooded the place with light.

Then he stepped back and motioned for her to enter in advance of him.

"Step inside, madam," he said. "You will find the portrait directly in front of you, at the opposite side of the room;" and she passed through the open door.

But, as she crossed the threshold, the detective reached out one hand, seized the door and closed it, remaining on the outside himself; and for a moment he stood there and listened, but not a sound came from the other side of the door.

"Good!" he said, aloud. "She knows now that I

have trapped her. I'll let her think it over for an hour or two alone, and, perhaps, when she finds that she is in a padded room from which there is no escape, she may decide to listen to a few terms which I will make with her. "If you have forestalled me by going to the police with your complaint about people bothering you, Madame Irma, I'll show you that Nick Carter can find a way to dispose of you without the aid of others."

Then he turned and descended the stairs.

CHAPTER IX.

THE REAPPEARANCE OF THE PRINCESS.

Having locked the door securely, Nick descended the stairs to the first floor again, and there he gave directions that nobody in the house was to visit the fourth floor, under any pretext, until his return.

Then he hastened across the street, and, having reassured the servants of Cora Tempest once again, he leaped into a cab and directed that he be driven with all speed to the house on Fifth Avenue, which Buck Granger had indicated as being the home of Irma Plavatski.

"For now," he said to himself, "that she is my prisoner, I will have no hesitation in forcing my way into her home, and if I find Cora there——"

He got no farther than that, for already the horses were thundering rapidly along the street, and in a surprisingly short time he found himself drawing near to the house he sought.

He stopped at the corner nearest the house and got down.

Then bidding the cabby to wait for him, he was approaching the house at a rapid gait, when the door opened and somebody came out.

He noticed then that there was already a carriage

front of the door, and that the person who had stepped from the house was making toward it, so he quickened his pace, and managed by almost breaking into a run, to arrive at the foot of the steps at the same moment that the woman did so.

And then, as he came almost to a stop, directly in front of her, she lifted her head, and at the same time turned it toward him so that they were literally face to face.

When Nick Carter mentions that moment to his friends he always speaks of it as being the greatest surprise of his life.

Just what the emotion was which swept through him, would be difficult to determine. Surprise, astonishment, incredulity, wonder, amazement, consternation, a paralyzing sense of unreality—all these things, all these emotions would find a place in such a description, and yet not one of them nor even all of them comprehended it.

The fact was that he was face to face with the very woman whom he supposed he had, only a very short time before, locked in a padded room on the fourth floor of his own house, two miles away.

"If that woman was Irma Plavatski, who was this one?" he asked himself in that instant of time when all the thoughts of a lifetime seemed to crowd themselves forward for recognition. "Or, if this woman is Irma Plavatski, who was that one?"

It was one of those moments in the detective's existence when the natural expression of the face served him best—if it served him at all, and as he came to a halt in front of her, he permitted all the surprise he felt to manifest itself in his expression.

He had not given a glance to the carriage as yet, and he did not do so now: he had only eyes for the woman, who was smiling at him in evident enjoyment of his too plain discomfiture.

"Well, sir?" she said; and then she frowned; but he

was startled again by the voice, for it was unquestionably the same. "Why do you stand in front of me. Let me pass, sir."

Nick raised his hat and bowed.

"A thousand pardons, madam," he said. "I was seeking the Princess del Puente. May I ask if you are the princess?"

"Unless your memory is as short as your courtesy, you should know who I am," she retorted. "Stand aside, sir. I wish no words with you."

Without waiting for him to obey her, she swept past him to the carriage, stepped inside, and was driven away.

Then, and not till then, he looked at the carriage and horses, and then—he understood.

Little by little a smile dawned on his face and spread.

"It isn't so wonderful after all, when one stops to think about it," he mused, as he turned away from the house and walked on while he thought it over. "The only thing that is strange about it all is that I should have forgotten that it was just as easy for her to walk out of that room as if I had not locked it at all. Then I went out of the house and crossed the street. I was in Cora Tempest's house fifteen minutes at least, and, after that, I walked over to Madison Square to get this cab. Why, she had loads of time to get into her own carriage and beat me here, easy."

And this was how it happened: The padded room had been closed for a long time, and only two or three days before that, Nick having noticed that it smelled musty, had suggested to Chick that he have the skylight left open for a few days.

Now, whenever the skylight of the padded room was left open, the stepladder which led to it was always left in place in order that it might be readily closed again; and from that skylight to the regular

scuttle, which was inevitably unlocked and where there were always stairs, was only a step.

The woman, upon finding herself locked in, had simply climbed the ladder to the roof and at once re-entered the house through the scuttle. Then, perceiving that Nick had just left the house, she had followed him to the street, as soon as he entered the house opposite, and entered her carriage and was driven home.

While he was turning these things over in his mind, he returned to his cab and stood with one foot upon the step while he pondered whether he would return to the house of the princess, as she called herself, and insist upon his first intention of discovering if Cora were there. And as he stood there, a hand dropped upon his arm, and he found Patsy standing beside him.

"Well, lad, what is it?" he asked.

"Sure, sir, it is nothing at all. I've been through the house from top to bottom, and there isn't a sign of Miss Cora there. I went to the telephone office and got a badge; after that it was easy enough to search the house."

"Did you find nothing at all which would suggest that Cora might be there, or had been there?"

"Not a thing, sir, only this."

As he spoke, Patsy reached out one hand from beneath his coat, exhibiting, as he did so, a heavy dagger of that peculiar pattern which belonged only to Davaar and his or her followers.

"Where did you find that?" asked Nick.

"I found it within this last holy minute, sir, pinning me fast to the door as I was closing it after leaving the house."

"Do you mean that it was thrown at you only just now?"

"That's what I mean, sure."

"From the inside of the house?"

"No; from the outside. From nowhere at all. It

just grew there. Sure, there wasn't a man, or a boy, or a girl, or a devil in sight when the stick appeared on the scene out of a clear sky, and—*what's that?*"

What indeed.

Nick Carter uttered a sound not unlike a sob and fell back without another sound, into the open door of the cab, and at the same instant, Patsy staggered forward and fell on top of his chief, also half inside the cab, while even the driver on the box, who had been using all his attention in an effort to hear what they were saying, pitched forward from his seat to the ground, and laid there with a bleeding head, senseless and still.

It seemed as if they were all stricken at the same instant, silently and without warning—as if bolts had fallen from heaven upon them, and this, on one of the residential corners of Fifth Avenue in New York City at eleven o'clock in the forenoon.

But they were not any of them long to remain there, a target for any eyes which chanced to glance that way, for even as the cabman fell to the ground, a carriage dashed up beside him, a man and a woman leaped out, and in ten seconds of time Nick Carter and Patsy were both lifted into the carriage which was driven rapidly away, while the cabby was left where he had fallen, for the horses to trample him, or for any chance pedestrian to discover him, and report the fact to the nearest policeman.

But it was not a policeman who found that cabman first, for big Buck Granger came swinging around the corner within a moment after the carriage had driven away with Nick and his young assistant, and it was he who picked the cabman from the ground; and, as he did so, the carriage which had taken his two friends away, reappeared again from around the next corner, and driving up in front of the house, stopped there.

Then, if Buck Granger had been looking in that direction, instead of upon the wounded cabman, he would have witnessed the spectacle of an unconscious man being made to appear to walk between two keepers, into the house of the Princess del Puente.

CHAPTER X.

THE GREAT DETECTIVE'S OATH.

When Nick Carter opened his eyes to consciousness he found himself in the most remarkable situation he had ever known.

He was seated in a comfortably upholstered chair in a beautifully furnished and appointed room. Before him was a table and upon it was a box of cigars and a decanter of wine with glasses.

But all that was not what astounded him; it was the enclosure in which his chair was placed, and he rubbed his eyes, scarcely believing that what he saw could be reality.

The fact was that within reach of his hand on every side of him, were the bars of a substantial cage.

It was sufficiently large to inclose within it, the easy-chair in which he was seated, and which he now saw might be easily converted into a bed; also the table and a small, revolving bookcase, well provided with books—and it was high enough so that he could, if he so desired, stand upright inside it.

But that was all.

It was an iron cage pure and simple.

There was no door to it in any place, and he could see that it was fastened to the floor with heavy screws.

The room itself, outside the cage, was almost sumptuous in its elegance; and, moreover, it bore many traces of being the living room of a woman.

"Well," he thought aloud, "this is decidedly original

in my experiences. Where in all the world am I, anyhow? Ah!"

As suddenly as the question, came recollection.

He remembered standing near the cab talking with Patsy, who had just come from the house where he had reason to believe that Dazaar lived, and then—he had felt a sharp pain in his side.

All was blank after that; all save this cage and the present awakening, at least.

"I suppose that fiend of a woman shot some sort of a dart into me which deprived me of consciousness," he mused; "and then, while I couldn't help myself, she had me brought here. Probably Patsy was served in the same way."

He rose to his feet and found that he felt no ill effects from his experience, and so, having discovered the cigars, he helped himself to one of them and was smoking placidly, when a door behind him opened, and he heard the rustle of silken skirts as they drew nearer to him.

"I hope those cigars are satisfactory," said the low, even tones of Irma Plavatski, behind him.

"Quite," he replied, without turning his head. "Did you select them? You smoke, I believe—or, at least, you did smoke one, didn't you, when—er—when you were a man?"

"No; I never smoked. How do you like your cage?"

"It's cozy."

"Quite so. Do you suppose you can endure life in there, for a few years?"

"Why! How delightful! Not a thing in the world to do but sit here and think, eh?"

"I'm glad you like it. Still, as a matter of fact, I have something very delightful to help you to pass the time away."

"Indeed! What is that?"

"Why, this is the room adjoining my torture chamber. There is only a curtain and a set of heavy doors between this room and that one. Both can be easily moved. I shall not permit the time to hang on your hands for a while, at least. Of course, later, you will get tired of viewing the tortures—unless I can invent new ones."

"What do you mean, you fiend?" asked Nick; and Irma smiled upon him like an angel.

"Shall I tell you what I mean?" she asked. "I will. I am going to make you as cruel as I am. I am going to satiate you so with sights of pain and suffering, that you will presently live upon them, as I do, and long for them, and cry out for more."

Nick regarded her coldly, wondering if she really meant all that she said; but he was soon to know, only too well that she did mean them.

"Listen," she said, "and I will tell you why I have brought you here. You, yourself, precipitated that, for I would have remained unknown to you yet a while, and won you by other means if it had been possible."

"Won me by other means?" asked Nick. "Do you mean that you are winning me now? Is that the idea, Irma?"

"Oh, yes, I will win you before I am through with you. If Buck Granger had not forestalled me, I should have sought you out in the guise of another, for you would never have believed that I had come to life—in fact, that I was never really dead at all, if it had not been brought to you in just the way it was."

"I think you are right about that. I doubt if I would."

"I did not know how nearly you guessed the truth when I went to your house this morning. That is why I followed you to the room where the picture was

supposed to be hanging. I was really curious to see if you had a life size portrait of me."

"If I had one," said Nick, "I would send it to the stockyards, to decorate the slaughter house."

"And so," she said, ignoring his last remark, "you are really here."

"It would seem that I am in reality here, indeed," replied Nick.

"And you know, I suppose, that your friend, Mr. Tempest, is also here."

"I supposed she was not far away."

"She is in there—in the next room—in the torture chamber," said Irma, smiling, as if that were delightful intelligence to communicate. "I will have the curtains and the door drawn aside presently, and I will show her to you. You may also talk to her—if she is not too busy to talk."

"Might I inquire," asked the detective, with icy calmness, "what there might be in there to keep her so busy that she could not talk?"

"Oh, you will discover that for yourself," she replied.

Then, suddenly, she seemed to transform herself into a veritable fury.

With a quick stride she approached the bars of the cage until her hands rested upon them, and, pushing her face close up against the bars themselves, she gnashed between her teeth, and with her blood-red lips almost foaming:

"Don't you know what I have brought you here for?" she cried. "I will tell you. You are here to feed upon agony until you sweat blood. You shall look through those bars upon the most horrible forms of human suffering that I can invent. You shall see this woman whom I have been told you would make your wife, eaten away inch by inch, by Mexican ants

which I have imported here for torture purposes. She will cry out to you for help, and you will be unable to go to her. You will see her die, inch by inch, in the most horrible agony. You will hear her shrieks through days and nights until she can shriek no longer.

"And when she is dead, your boy Patsy will take her place. I will sear him with hot irons. I will burn out his eyes. I will toast his flesh and brand him with hot pinchers. I will pull the hairs of his head out, one by one until he is bald. I will slit his tongue, and shoot needles into his flesh with blow guns.

"And after Patsy there will be others and others. We shall never want for victims. I have only to go out upon the street to find a young girl or a boy to stock my torture chamber. We shall not want for victims.

"There shall be hundreds of them—hundreds. One by one they shall pass before your eyes until you gloat upon torture as I do—until you are as mad as I am; and then, when you have seen all these things—when there is nothing horrible left for you to experience—when you can look upon human agony with a smile of pleasure as I do now, then—why, then, you will love me, and I will have won you; yes, then I shall have won you—won you!

"See!"

She leaped forward to the curtain and drew it aside; and then, with a quick wrench, she threw the doors ajar, and Nick could scarcely repress a groan when his eyes beheld what was beyond that barrier and he realized how utterly helpless he was.

Cora Tempest was there before his eyes, arrayed in clinging robes of white, and around her waist was a heavy band of iron which in its turn was fastened to the wall by a chain and padlock.

She uttered one cry of astonished recognition when she saw and recognized him, and then her voice sank to a despairing wail, for, although she had been told

that he was there, she had not believed until now, when she saw him before her eyes.

"Nick," she called to him; but before he could answer her, the mocking laugh of the mad woman filled the two rooms and echoed along them like the wail of a banshee.

"Call to him," she cried; "he cannot get to you. I have him in an iron cage where he cannot suffer, but where he can witness your agonies. You suffer, woman, because he loves you, but you need not suffer if he will forswear you and cleave to me.

"What say you?" she cried, turning to him again. "Foreswear this woman, promise me on your honor that you will make me your wife and keep me your wife for one year, and I care not what happens to me after that. You may kill me! You may murder me! You may put me in the torture chamber, as I have put her there! You may turn the ants loose upon me! You may sear my eyeballs with hot irons! You may pull my tongue out with pinchers! You may do all these things and more, and she may go free, now, this minute, and forever, if only you will promise me on your honor that you will have me for your wife for one whole year——"

She ceased of a sudden and started back, appalled by what happened at that instant.

It has been said that no person had ever seen the full strength of Nick Carter exerted to its utmost. He had often said that he did not know the power that was in his muscles, if opportunity should ever come when grave necessity required him to exert them to their greatest capacity.

That moment had now arrived.

The terrible sight of this woman-demon, mocking at him and at Cora; her horrible words and threats and the unspeakable picture she drew with her hideously beautiful face distorted by the passions that flamed

within her, nerved him to an effort he would never have thought of making under other circumstances.

With a bound he leaped forward and seized the iron bars of his cage in his hands, and then, as if they were made of lead, they writhed and twisted in his grasp until they snapped between his fingers like straws.

In an instant he had torn them aside, and pulled one of the sections loose in his hands, and the next he had leaped out upon the floor before the mad woman, who screamed at him, and shrieked in dismay when she saw that he was escaping, but who could do nothing to prevent him.

Nothing but the one and only thing, to turn and fly, and that she did, disappearing through a door which Nick had not noticed hitherto.

But Nick Carter cared little for her or her escaping at that moment.

He was free from the iron cage, and Cora was a prisoner chained to the wall before him.

He could not tell what other and fiendish things Irma Plavatski would do, now that her prey was about to escape from her clutches. She might blow up the house. She might yet find a way to destroy Cora with one of her poisoned darts, or one of her hellish daggers which she could throw so unerringly.

With the half of one of the iron bars in his grasp, Nick leaped to Cora's side, and in an instant he had bent the staple from the wall and set her free from that.

Then she staggered into his arms almost exhausted by fright and terror, but he placed her on her feet again, quickly.

"Be brave now if ever, Cora," he said to her; and then he raised his voice and called:

"Patsy! Patsy!"

"Here," came a reply almost at his elbow, and he turned to see that another cage not unlike the one in

which he had been confined, was standing farther back in the room out of the range of his vision from where his own cage was located.

"Sure, I'm waiting for you, sir," said Patsy. "Maybe you can pry the thing loose with that bar you have in your hand."

"Pry it?" said Nick; and he seized hold of it with his hands while he braced his feet against the wall, and in a trice he tore it loose from its fastenings and hurled it to the floor.

"Can you walk, Cora?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Then come. I must get you to your home at once. After that——"

"After that—what?" she asked, bending toward him.

"After that," he replied, grimly, "I shall return here and I will leave no stone unturned and follow no other case until I have seen Irma Plavatski placed where she can do no more wickedness in this world."

"It that an oath, sir?" asked Patsy.

"Yes; it is a sacred promise which I make in the name of all humanity."

"Then, sir, maybe you'll count me and Chick in with you on that deal. Will you?"

"Yes; not one of us shall perform any other duty until we have hunted Irma Plavatski from off the face of the earth."

"So be it," assented Cora.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 395, will contain "A Compact with Dazaar; or, The Devil Worshipers' Den." This story will tell you of the mysterious rites of the holy marriage practised by the devil worshippers and of the last desperate effort made by the beautiful Dazaar to win Nick Carter.

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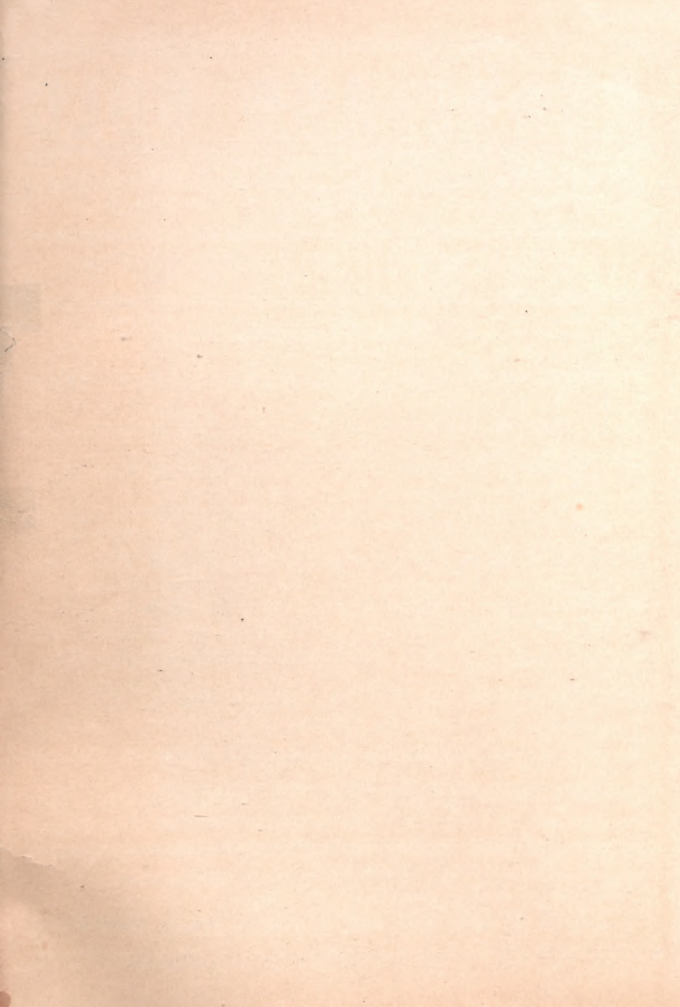
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